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Project-specific Web sites

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Interior design firms can leverage their presence on the World Wide Web beyond marketing purposes by creating a project-specific Web site. Doherty lists a few of the providers offering such sites.

Full Text (709 words)

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New to the Internet are project-specific Web sites (PSWS), spurred by the adoption of digital information throughout the construction process and the need for better information management and project control. A project-specific Web site can leverage your firm's presence on the World Wide Web beyond marketing purposes, by allowing authorized people access to specific project information on a secure Web site. These dedicated sites are fairly easy to use and operate, even for the technically challenged.

Here are some reasons to consider using a PSWS:

To reduce communication errors among project team members

To capture up-to-the-minute intelligence on all the decisions and collective information relating to a project

To cut the cost of express mail, messengers, copies, and blueprints

Because you can customize it for each project and each team member

Because of its ubiquitous accessibility

Because of its security

But the most important reason for a design professional to implement this technology is that the person who controls the project information controls the project.

There are choices in implementing such a site. A design firm may elect to host a PSWS system internally within its own computer systems, outsource the maintenance of the system to a commercial solution provider, or, at the client's request, upload project information into the client's PSWS. Although a few of the large design firms run their own project-specific



Web sites as a value-added service, most do not have the technical, financial, or human resources required to successfully operate such a site internally. Therefore they turn to the growing cadre of commercial providers who offer Web-based project management services, or they become part of the project team participating in the client's own project-specific Web site.

These are the components universal to all projectspecific Web sites: a project directory; an electronic file cabinet of documents (specs, CAD, product information); online forms and logs (RFIs, revisions, etc.); discussion threads for topics; project progress information (photos, reports, etc.); and an easyto-use front-end screen.

Most outsourced PSWS services operate in similar ways: You subscribe on a per-project basis for a fixed monthly fee, ranging from \$99 to \$500 a month. You are given limited customization options that allow you to name the project, input contact information for each project team member, and upload project information. All provider services keep back-up copies of your project information, so that it will always be available on the Net no matter when or where you need it.

Here are a few of the providers offering project-specific Web sites:

ProjectCenter by EVOLV (http://www.evolv.com), a new service run by architects for architects. It is accessible within the AIAOnline Web site (http://www.aia.org) and offers discounts to AIA members.

ProjectNet by BlueLine/OnLine (http://www.bluelineonline.com), a PSWS pioneer with several large projects to its credit.

eBuilder by the Global Construction Network (http://www.gcn.net), in service since 1996 with a track record of successful projects

Aspects SiteBuilder by Framework Technologies (http://www.frametech.com), a supplier that lets you see the software build your PSWS before your eyes as you answer questions. (You need to find a service provider to host the site once it's built).

No matter how you choose to implement your PSWS, one thing is certain: Your clients are adopting these technologies at a rapid pace and are expecting you to use them on their construction projects. For example, 3 Com Corporation currently has \$450 million in global construction projects being run on the Web through their own project-specific Web sites. They require all members of the project teams to have Internet connectivity and use basic Information Age communication tools, such as email. Why is 3 Com requiring these skills and tools? Because it saves them an enormous amount of time and money during the design and construction phase of their buildings. More importantly, they can reuse this captured information to operate and maintain their newly constructed buildings throughout their lifecycles.

Project-specific Web sites are a fascinating Internet trend that is here to stay. Since we can't forestall the inevitable, our challenge as design professionals is to determine how we can gain the most (or suffer the least) by learning to work within the new format.

[Author Affiliation]

Paul Doherty, AIA is president of The Digit Group (http://www.thedigitgroup.com) and is author of Cyberplaces: The Internet Guide for Architects, Engineers & Contractors (http://www.cyberplaces.com).

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